

THE DESTRUCTION OF NATIVE BIRDS IN NEW SOUTH WALES.

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DURING a visit to the head-waters of two of the North-Coast rivers, I ascertained that an incredible number of the beautifully plumaged males of the Rifle-bird and Regent Bower-bird were destroyed throughout the year, a large export trade being done in the skins of these species, chiefly for the purposes of adornment and decoration of ladies' hats and dresses.

The wanton destruction of a more modestly plumaged, but equally attractive species, has been brought prominently under the notice of the public through an article entitled "The destruction of Lyre-birds," in the columns of a newspaper,¹ in which the writer records that a man, carrying a number of Lyre-birds' tails, or rather portions of tails, had called on him the previous day, asking if he would purchase one. Inquiries made elicited the fact that the man had collected about two hundred and fifty of them on the Paterson River, New South Wales, during the open season, and a lot more the previous one. The pertinent question is asked, "Why should any one be allowed to shoot these beautiful birds?"

The three species of Lyre-bird comprising the genus *Menura*, all of which are found in New South Wales, are possessors of the richest and most varied notes of any bird in Australia, and as mocking-birds are unequalled in the world. The tails referred to above, which I saw being offered for sale in George and Pitt-streets, Sydney, on the same day all belonged to the oldest described species of the genus, *Menura superba*, and were those of the male birds only. As the Lyre-bird builds in the early winter months, and the single egg laid by it in a season is usually deposited in July, it is evident that many of these birds were shot while paired, for the close season does not commence until the 1st of August. All species of the Lyre-bird, the Rifle-bird, and the Regent Bower-bird, should be accorded absolute protection throughout the year. "The Bird Protection Act of 1893," is a very useful piece of legislation, but its clauses are, unfortunately, as a rule, more honoured in the breach than in the observance.

¹ *Sydney Daily Telegraph*, 29th August, 1900.

Country residents, or persons who shoot birds for a livelihood, are not more culpable in this respect than are the dwellers in large cities. I refer more particularly to youthful gunners, who go to the outlying suburbs on Saturday afternoons, and further afield on holidays throughout the year, and shoot at every bird they come across. Many of the birds killed are of inestimable value to the orchardist, horticulturist, and agriculturist, ridding his trees or land of many injurious insect pests, without fee or reward. In the breeding season, too, many birds are killed while incubating their eggs or engaged in family cares, leaving either their eggs to rot in the nest, or young ones to perish miserably from starvation. To a less extent, indiscriminate egg-collecting by boys, is responsible for many birds either seeking safer nesting-sites, or being driven away from the environment of the cities and suburbs, or their numbers decreased. In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, it is due to thoughtlessness and not want of heart, and the mischief wrought should be pointed out to them and discouraged by their elders.

In the United States of America, this is done by many teachers in the public schools, who encourage the children regularly to learn the names of the birds around them, and point out the folly of destroying what may in after life be beneficial to their pursuits, and a source of pleasure to them. Bird-day there is also an annual institution, like Arbour-day.

While on the subject, and ere it is too late, I wish to place on record the many other agencies at work at the present time, that are tending to rapidly drive away, diminish, or ultimately exterminate many species of our native birds in New South Wales.

It is inevitable that by the steady growth of cities and their suburbs throughout the State, and the consequent clearing and burning of scrub lands, and drainage of swamps, many birds are either destroyed or driven away from their former haunts. This is only a natural sequence. Take the metropolis as an instance. The Emu no longer roams through the scrub between Botany Bay and Sydney Harbour, as in Governor Phillip's time, and as I have pointed out elsewhere,² many species once common in the neighbourhood of Sydney within the memory of present residents, now no longer frequent the County of Cumberland. On the 1st August, 1895, between Botany and La Perouse, I found many nests of the New Holland Honey-eater, containing eggs or young ones. Numbers of men who had previously been engaged in felling the scrub, were, at the time of my visit, occupied in setting light to it in different places and burning it off. A strong north wind was blowing at the time, and the fire quickly spread to the

² North—Austr. Assoc. Adv. Sci., Handbk. (Sydney Meeting), 1898, p. 69.

heath and standing scrub, consequently destroying many hundreds of nests containing eggs or young.

Many native birds are driven from their usual haunts by the introduction and acclimatization of both foreign birds and mammals. Owing to the ample cover around Sydney, the former evil will not be so apparent for many years as it is at present in Melbourne, which is virtually denuded of its indigenous trees for miles around. In the immediate neighbourhood of the latter city, hardly a single native bird is to be seen. During a fortnight's stay, in March, 1899, in a northern suburb five miles from the city, and surrounded on two sides with open paddocks, I observed three species—the House Swallow, the Black-backed Magpie, and the Australian Pipit or "Ground Lark." Some of the missing ones were represented by the ubiquitous Sparrow, the Indian Myna, and the Starling. A couple of miles' walk through paddocks, either way from the station of a southern marine suburb, ten miles from town, revealed an additional three species of native birds—the White-fronted Ephthianura, the White-plumed Honey-eater, and the Yellow-rumped Thornbill. Now from experience I know that in both of these, and many other of the Melbourne suburbs, the native birds were at one time fairly well represented, for they were my early hunting-grounds, and what has happened to Melbourne will, in time to come, happen to Sydney and its immediate neighbourhood. At Ashfield, near Sydney, I have seen colonies of the Fairy Martin ousted out of their nests and driven away by the usurping Sparrows; and in the same neighbourhood and around Five Dock and Canterbury, the Starlings are rapidly increasing, and both of these acclimatized birds far outnumber any species of native birds in these suburbs. The Goldfinch, Greenfinch, and Indian Myna, although increasing, are not perceptibly numerous at present, and the Skylarks which frequent the Centennial Park, and the open heath-lands of Randwick and Botany, have not apparently interfered with the breeding of terrestrial species.

It is, however, the importation of foreign mammals that has directly and indirectly caused the destruction of a vast number of our Australian birds, and this loss is still going on day by day. Hundreds of thousands of pounds have been expended in trying to eradicate the Rabbit from the western half of New South Wales. This has been partly accomplished by the erection of rabbit-proof fences, and the laying of poisoned baits. For the latter, phosphorized oats is chiefly used, with the result that in addition to the Rabbits, thousands of granivorous birds perish annually, chiefly the ground and grass-frequenting species of Pigeons, Parakeets, Finches, and Quail. To cope with the Rabbits, domestic cats were also turned loose in the central and south-western divisions of the State, with the result that after

Rabbits had been eradicated or had disappeared, the felines—now become wild and of increased size—turned their attention to the ground and low-bush frequenting birds, destroying large numbers of many species, and causing the total extinction of others where they were once common.

Poisoned baits laid for Wedge-tailed Eagles, Ravens, and Crows, are also frequently taken by Magpies and other useful species.

The Fox, that acclimatised curse in Victoria, and which is rapidly extending over the southern portions of New South Wales, in addition to robbing poultry-yards, is rapidly diminishing the numbers of one of the most interesting species of the Victorian avi-fauna. Mr. G. A. Keartland informs me that in the lair of one of these animals in the Dandenong Ranges, the remains of upwards of thirty tails of Queen Victoria's Lyre-bird were found, mostly those of females, the birds being presumably captured while sitting on their nests.

By the newspapers, I also observe that "great ravages have been made by Foxes among the young lambs in the Corowa District of New South Wales this season."³

Tens of thousands of birds, principally Finches and Parakeets, used to be trapped annually on the western plains of New South Wales, but their numbers are now sadly diminished. To give an instance: the pretty little "Budgerigar," or Warbling Grass Parakeet, used to be sent to Melbourne and Sydney many years ago in thousands, but seldom now any great number of these birds is to be seen in dealer's shops. In 1839, in the early days of settlement of the State, Gould records that on arrival at Breeza, to the north of the Liverpool Plains, he found himself surrounded by numbers of these birds, breeding in the hollow spouts, and that since his return to England in 1840, he had more than once seen two thousand at a time in a small room at a dealer's in Wapping. I have several times passed over the Liverpool Plains, and through Breeza in the breeding-season, without hearing so much as the twitter of one of these birds, and during the last decade it is rarely one meets with them in New South Wales in any considerable number. I do not wish to infer that all these birds have been exterminated by trappers or by poisoned grain, only that a vast number has been captured and destroyed, and they are not found in their old haunts, where they were once abundant.

Periods of long-continued drought, from which the western district of the State has suffered for years past, is an important factor in the disappearance of many granivorous species, for without an abundant rainfall, the various plants and grasses, on the

³ *Sydney Daily Telegraph*, 10th September, 1900.

seeds of which these birds subsist, do not exist. From Byrock to Bourke, during very hot summers, it is not an uncommon thing for large numbers of birds to die with the excessive heat. As both the Finches and Parakeets are prolific breeders, with the return of good seasons it is to be hoped they will appear again in their old haunts as numerous as ever.

I do not fear as much for a diminished Avifauna inland as near the coast and in the vicinity of large centres of population. Of those birds frequenting our coastal brushes and contiguous mountain ranges, the Lyre-bird, if successful, rears only one young bird in a season; the Rifle-bird and Regent Bower-bird, usually two each, at the most three, in a season. The adult males of all three of these species, having a commercial value, apart from their value as natural history specimens, are in the future liable to be utterly exterminated, unless stringent measures are taken for their absolute protection. Large areas of still unalienated virgin brush lands and mountain-range should be perpetually reserved in the haunts of these beautiful birds, and the entire flora and fauna of these reserves kept sacred and zealously guarded against all would-be destroyers.

Briefly summed up the facts are these:—Partly through nature's laws, and partly through ignorance, carelessness, and design, the destruction of bird-life has been for years past, and is still going on almost unrestricted. Through nature's laws, by the growth of cities and suburbs, the felling and burning of brush and forest lands in the country districts, and bush fires; by the ignorance of boys and youths not knowing the damage they are doing in shooting birds throughout the year; through carelessness on the part of persons introducing foreign mammals and birds into Australia, and ignorant whether their introduction will prove beneficial or harmful; by design in the wilful trapping and shooting of birds in the close season.

Where preventible, is this annual loss of bird-life to continue? If so, ere another century is passed, the sweet melody of birds may no longer be heard by the future dweller near city, hill, or plain, and Australia become what was so falsely reported of her in the early days of settlement, a songless land—a land of silence
